

Testimony of William Millan

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“Preserving the Amazon: a Shared Moral Imperative”

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, Members of the Committee, it is a pleasure and an honor to be asked to testify today about the situation in the Amazon Basin.

By way of introduction, I am a former US diplomat, with many years experience in Central America, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela and the Organization of American States. Since retiring from government service, I have worked in conservation: first for many years at the Nature Conservancy and now for four years at the International Conservation Caucus Foundation (ICCF). We act as the secretariat for the ICC, a caucus of about 170 Members in the House and Senate. We also work in parks in many countries, through our Conservation Corps. I am not a conservation scientist, but I have broad experience of the political, social and economic issues that arise as our neighbor countries attempt to manage their natural resources, so important to their own prosperity and to the world.

The Amazon Basin is over 2 million square miles, the world’s largest tropical forest by far, three times the size of the Congo which comes second. About 90 percent is rain forest. 60 percent lies within Brazil, with most of the remainder in Peru and Colombia. About 20 percent of the original forest cover of the Amazon Basin has been destroyed since 1970, when rapid deforestation began. About 80 percent of that deforestation has been for cattle ranching. Deforestation often occurs in stages. Where the lumber is valuable and accessible to markets, loggers clear cut the trees. Then would-be cattle ranchers burn what is left to clear pastures. Much of this is done in defiance of national laws and encroaches on legally proclaimed parks or government reserves for indigenous tribes. In the process, tribes are often killed or driven off. Where the soil can be made suitable with modern methods and fertilizers, the land may later be converted to field crops, mainly soy. Brazil is the world’s largest beef exporter and has recently passed the United States as the world’s largest soybean producer and exporter.

Deforestation is not unique to Brazil. It has also been high in neighboring Paraguay and Bolivia, and in regions of Peru and Colombia. During the period 1960 to 2010, the population of the Brazilian Amazon rose from six million to twenty-five million persons, many of them employed in agriculture.

Deforestation of the Amazon peaked in Brazil in 2005, when an area of forest the size of Haiti disappeared each year. It dropped by about 70 percent in the following decade. While market forces

may have played a role in this decline, it was not mirrored in other countries of the basin, which suggests that better enforcement of Brazilian laws (which mandated that private landowners keep a percentage of their land in forest, and forbade intrusions on protected areas) was the major cause. Forty-four percent of the Brazilian Amazon is supposed to be legally protected as parks or indigenous reserves. The decline in deforestation rates came to an end about 2016, when totals reported rose sharply. From mid-2018 to mid-2019, deforestation totals in the Brazilian Amazon rose even faster, by between 40 and 80 percent. The rate of change is disputed, but the direction is clear.

People have a right to development their natural resources. That right is probably clearest when the people are poor. Brazil has been described as a modern, high-productivity population the size of France's (67 million) but which has an actual total population of 211 million. Brazil has a highly unequal distribution of income, a gini coefficient of 53 (higher than nearly all its neighbors), versus 41 in the United States, 33 in the UK and 29 in Sweden. Brazil still has a large population of poorly educated small farmers, eager to respond to the possibility of "free" land and better jobs, and many large ranchers and farmers ready to employ them in defiance of national laws. It is especially painful to note that fifteen percent of the Amazon is reserved by law for Indian tribes. If the laws are weakened or not enforced, their fate (already difficult) is likely to get worse.

The situation in the Brazilian Amazon, and in neighboring countries of the Basin, is a complex one that involves balancing many competing interests, many of them legitimate. It is unlikely to be resolved purely by outside pressures. A mixture of political, economic, and moral suasion will be needed for many years to come. Progress will be uneven and sometimes reversed. But we have to try and keep trying. US foreign assistance can play an important role.

I will close by recalling a study done at the Nature Conservancy while I worked there. I hope my former colleagues will not resent my citing their work. TNC experts looked at the future of world population growth, the switch to eating more meat as populations become prosperous, and hence the need to increase total agricultural production worldwide by 100 percent at some date soon after 2050. They concluded that if this need was met by increasing the land in cultivation, the entire natural world would be destroyed. Only by raising the production of existing lands, by methods that marry high production with sustainability, can future needs be met without destruction. The meaning of this is -- the Amazon is not needed for the future of agriculture. The existing forest is needed for a host of other benefits. We urge the congress to support that goal.